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A BRICK AT A NEW LITERARY IDOL *

A characteristic if singular turn of the literary fashion of to-day is the laudation of Samuel Butler's posthumous novel, *The Way of All Flesh*. A novel at least he intended it to be,¹ and it is written in the manner of a novel; but in reality it is more a criticism, by a clever and sometimes very sound and sane observer, of certain relations of the Church of England to English society about the middle of the nineteenth century, and still more of the relations of English children to their parents, especially—but not solely—in a clergyman's family. As such the book is worth reading—ininitely more so than a great deal of fiction which has been more popular, both before and since *The Way of All Flesh* was published in 1903. This fact, though, does not make it one of the great novels of our literature, as there is a fashion of calling it. Because this fashion seems to be spreading, there is reason for examining *The Way of All Flesh* to see on what its claims to greatness are based. When such an examination is made soberly, with intelligent understanding of what constitutes a great novel, the conclusion is likely to be that the present vogue of *The Way of All Flesh* will soon take the course indicated in its title. Though the merits of the book, coupled with some (but not very great) importance of Samuel Butler in the history of English literature, will always draw readers to it, it is doubtful if it will long be read widely. Just now there is a Butler fad in the English-speaking world. When this has passed, laudation of *The Way of All Flesh* will pass too. Seventy or eighty years hence, it will probably be known about as much as Samuel Warren's *Ten Thousand a Year* is known to-day. That was a famous novel seventy-five years ago,

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¹ It is quite right to judge the work by the standards of a novel. Butler's biographers, Mr. Cannan and Mr. Harris, call it a novel without hesitation. One of many signs that Butler himself so regarded it is his remark that he need not describe Ernest's Cambridge days in detail, "as the life of a quiet steady-going graduate has been told in a score of novels better than I can tell it."—Ch. XLV.

and it is still well worth the reading for the many good things in it, though now little read and undeniably *long*.

There is a difference, though, in the abiding interest of the two books. *Ten Thousand a Year* has managed to keep alive because of its intrinsic merits; despite exaggeration and tedium, there is plenty of real human nature in it. *The Way of All Flesh*, by no means without such interest, is more likely to be remembered chiefly as an example of a tendency which future critics will look on as amusingly curious, though probably inevitable according to the laws of action and reaction. To be in the fashion, it has been necessary, ever since the present century came in, to condemn the ideals of fifty years ago. Now the standards, artistic and moral, of our proper Victorian predecessors were not perfect; but neither are those of our own generation. Have we really advanced in æsthetic perception? In our conduct have we really freed ourselves from the shackles of hypocrisy? The swing of the pendulum, to be sure, has often been more theoretical than actual; and that is why critics in the future are likely to find so many of our opinions funny. Good souls on every hand will damn the Victorians up and down, who are either happily too decent or too timid and prudish ever to be anything but Victorian in their own lives. And of such are many admirers of *The Way of All Flesh*.

The story deals with the fortunes of various members of an English family named Pontifex, especially of Ernest Pontifex, who is proclaimed the hero. It is not a pleasant story; it is, to say the least, sordid and depressing. But a summary of it is necessary to make clear what people of the nicest refinement are praising as a "great novel" and recommending to their friends.

Theobald Pontifex, grandson of an old village carpenter of character and thrift, and son of George Pontifex, a vulgarly successful and hard business man, receives a university education; enters the Church, and as a curate is beguiled into marriage with the somewhat old-maidish Christina Allaby, a clergyman's daughter a few years his senior. Ernest, born in 1835, the same year as Samuel Butler himself, is the eldest of their three children. Brought up in the harshest clerical discipline at home, Ernest is hardly aware, when he is sent away to school, of the

hypocrisy and cruelty of the teachers, especially the head-master, Dr. Skinner. His only real friends are his godfather, Mr. Overton, a family friend of all the Pontifexes and the supposed teller of the tale, and his father's sister, Miss Alethea Pontifex, a lady endowed, in the author's mind, with daring independence, sense, frankness, and charm. Unfortunately for Ernest she dies when he is still a schoolboy, but she secretly leaves £15,000 for him in trust to Mr. Overton, to be paid to him, with accumulated interest, when he is twenty-eight.

At Cambridge, where Ernest first enjoys independence, he is for once in his life fairly happy. But his happiness is short-lived. Without the least inclination for the Church, he takes orders because parental teaching has never allowed him to think of any other career. Desiring to understand the lower classes, he lives in a poor district of London at the lodging-house of "Mrs." Jupp, a lady of indubitably shady past whose present is more reputable only because of advancing years. Here, excited by meeting a prostitute named Snow, who receives among other young men the handsome, well-bred, and well-dressed Towneley, the college friend who had most charmed Ernest, the young clergyman caps a series of incredibly foolish blunders by taking another young woman lodger, Miss Maitland, for the same kind of person as Miss Snow. But she is quite different, and the result of Ernest's misplaced proposals is six months in jail.

When Ernest comes out, his clerical career of course blasted, he has little aim in life till he falls in with Ellen, a former servant of his mother's, who had been turned away for being with child. She has been in jail herself and is now a street-walker, but she looks fresh and innocent, and Ernest having found her a good mistress, proceeds to make her his wife. Together they set up an old-clothes shop which is tolerably successful, and the "hero" is tolerably happy. Lacking in common-sense, as always, he never suspects that Ellen is a drunkard, as she has long been, till some months after their first child is born. When he is thoroughly tired of his wife, Ernest is fortunate enough to run across his father's old coachman, John, the original seducer of the girl, and to discover that John and Ellen have been married. He sends Ellen about her business; and showing for once some

sense if not natural affection, he puts their two children to board in the family of a bargeman down the Thames, who is to bring them up in ignorance of their parentage.

Ernest comes into his money, much increased by the wise care of Mr. Overton, just in time to respond to the hypocritically forgiving summons of his father to his mother's deathbed. To her his arrival is a very real joy, for her exaggerated religion had never quite stifled Christina's maternal instinct; to his father, however, he is a distressingly well-dressed, well-to-do, and altogether unorthodox prodigal. He never reveals himself as their father to his own children, who grow up untroubled by education, and marry happily into the family of the bargeman or some similar neighboring family. Ernest himself has money enough to travel on the Continent whenever he wishes, with his elderly friend, Mr. Overton, and to live in comfortable bachelor chambers in London, a writer favorably but not widely known. At last he has found himself and attained happiness.

Such is the story of *The Way of All Flesh*, and surely it is not because of the story that the book is so highly praised. A vast number of its admirers, we must remember, are such decently conventional people that if anybody of their acquaintance did a quarter, or even a tenth, of the things which Ernest does, and was found out, they would cut him dead. The cause of admiration must be, then, either the ideas, or Butler's method of expressing them, or both.

Decidedly there are interesting and significant ideas in the novel, at times forcibly expressed, as there are bound to be in anything from Butler's pen. His strength lies in pointing out with shrewd common sense the follies and hypocrisies of his countrymen. Unfortunately his comment is generally negative rather than positive. He notes a fault or eccentricity here and another there, and occasionally he emphasizes a vice by putting stress on the antithetical virtue; but fundamentally he is not constructive. When he comes to the building of either character or argument, in fact to any organic composition, he is likely to become uneven or to break down. Moreover, the manifestation of his power is apt to seem complacent or conscious. Admirers of Butler do him poor service in quoting frequently, as

they do, a certain entry in his *Note-Books*, for it points to one of his greatest faults. "I am the *enfant terrible* of literature and science," he proclaimed with evident pride. "If I cannot . . . get the big-wigs to give me a shilling, I can . . . heave bricks into the middle of them." Here is conscious and self-satisfied iconoclasm with a vengeance! Spontaneous iconoclasm, even if savage, may excite admiration, but not iconoclasm which one suspects of being worked up. And Butler's iconoclasm is not only too obviously worked up but also too often misdirected. The trouble is not that he lacks ideas and theories. Even a superficial examination of his works shows that he has them in plenty and that he states them with emphasis. But too often the emphasis is made more important than the thought; the thought itself is not constructive; or if it is, our own experience makes us doubt its truth.

The Way of All Flesh, though not published till 1903, the year after Butler's death, was begun in the early seventies; it was finished some ten years later. About the time of its beginning, two other important works of Butler appeared, *Erewhon* and *The Fair Haven*; and many entries then, and still more before the conclusion of the novel, had been made in the *Note-Books*. The characteristics of the earlier works are the characteristics of the novel too. As in them, its comments on English life range all the way from such as are keenly true and spontaneously daring to others that are mistaken or forced. In fact many observations of the *Note-Books* are reproduced in the novel, sometimes in terms but little altered. There is the same cynical but by no means indefensible assertion, that of all losses in the world, "money losses are the worst."² There are the delightful attacks on militant virtue and the commendation of temperate vice. The assertion of Ernest's unscrupulous clerical friend, Pryer, that "no practice is entirely vicious which has not been extinguished among the comeliest, most vigorous, and most cultivated races of mankind,"³ is close to Butler's own opinion, which all advocates of National Prohibition, and sundry others, should take well to heart: "The world can ill spare any vice

² *Note-Books*, London, 1912, p. 37

³ Ch. LII.

which has obtained long and largely among civilized people.”⁴ Observations like these richly justify a book; but for one of these there are apt to be, unfortunately, two or more that have written all over them that self-conscious, “I am the *enfant terrible* of literature.”

Sometimes the would-be wickedness and cynicism are worse than forced; they are flat. There is reason for ridiculing that task assigned Dr. Skinner’s unfortunate pupils of writing *Alcaics* about the dogs of the monks of St. Bernard. But when one of the boys, after the performance of the exercise, “for his own pleasure . . . wrote the following—

‘The dogs of the monks of St. Bernard go
To pick little children out of the snow,
And around their necks is the cordial gin
Tied with a little bit of bob-bin,’”—

did he, as Butler seems to think, do anything so very clever? Are many of us moved to say with Ernest, “I should like to have written that”?⁵ Or does it really seem “awful,” as Butler complacently declares, that Ernest should say that there are hardly any writings in the world “which seem so little to deserve their reputation” as some of the Psalms of David, and then go on, “I will take care never to read them myself?” Isn’t this a pretty labored rendering of the self-appointed rôle of “*enfant terrible* of literature”?

Still more uneven is *The Way of All Flesh* in regard to the primary requisite of a great novel—characters. A novel may have the loosest possible structure, it may be improbably romantic or sordidly realistic, but if it is full of living characters who impress their reality on the reader in the dramatic way—that is, by what they say and do rather than by what the author says of them—then it is well on the road to greatness. Now Butler himself explains his characters much more than he allows them, by what they say and do and write, to explain themselves. It will be hard to find an English novel that has won even an iota of lasting fame, which has not far more conversation on its pages than *The Way of All Flesh*. With certain brilliant exceptions,

⁴ *Note-Books*, p. 27.

⁵ Ch. XLIV.

Butler lacks the dramatic ability which the greatest novelists have always had. Aunt Alethea, the one character of the book whom the author clearly wants us to like very much, we see not at all. To her is given no individualizing touch except a "wicked little laugh," which the reader must take solely on Butler's authority, for Butler never makes us hear it. Nor does Ernest, whom I suppose we should like, too, assume any more individuality. Nearly everything he says is likewise "with a laugh"; that is about the only distinctive touch given *him*; but you hear his laugh (presumably a Pontifex inheritance) no more than you do his aunt's. And here one can't help wondering if Butler was not unconsciously influenced by Defoe, one of the few English writers of fiction whom he is said to have known and admired. It is a commonplace of criticism that for all Defoe's amazing and telling minuteness in regard to things, he is bare in minutiae regarding people. But he has one unfailing method of trying to vivify them. Of every one to whom he thinks he has given the breath of life, he continually writes, so-and-so "said smiling." The perpetual, unindividual "smiling" of Defoe's characters is like the inevitable laugh of Alethea and Ernest Pontifex.

Yet Butler could make his people real enough at times — indeed one or two most of the time, if not always. It is quite real, Ernest's musing in the train about his aunt who has died, as he looks out of the window at her house on leaving school for college, and one of the few bits of feeling in the book that are sympathetic. And one character is thoroughly alive, Ernest's mother, Christina, who is Butler's masterpiece. Such blighting "Christian" women, with the natural spark of mother-love not quite extinguished in spite of all their conscientious efforts, are still to be found in clerical, and in not a few lay, households. Probably, alas! they always will be. Next to her in life is the very different woman, the disreputable Jupp, who is touched with a daring that is Shakespearean, though not always with Shakespearean sense of fitness. Theobald Pontifex, the narrow, hypocritical parson, is excellently imagined at least, if unevenly presented. So is his materialistic father. There are glimpses of reality, too, in Ernest's normal, healthy college friend, Towneley, and in

others. Then there are occasional little vivid scenes which the best novelists might be proud of, such as the city-bred Londoners' stopping in wonder to look at some young lambs in the Green Park on a balmy spring morning.⁶ But all in all, scenes and people in *The Way of All Flesh* have not the reality that you expect in a great novel.

It is not only because Butler lacked the constructive ability to "see his characters through," so to speak, that they are unreal. Another reason is that frequently both people and scenes are in the story not because they naturally would be, given the characters so far as we can understand them, but because they help Samuel Butler to expound his queer theories. So the people will take the wrong path arbitrarily and unnaturally. Ernest, because of his early training, may be a fool; but is any graduate of a great university, even if he is an innocent clergyman, likely to be quite such a fool (it is hard not to leave blanks before the word *fool* for the discriminating reader to fill in appropriately) as to get sent to jail for six months for not distinguishing between a Miss Snow and a Miss Maitland; as to marry Ellen, the street-walker, and to live with her till after their first child is born without realizing that she drinks? No, the hero of *The Way of All Flesh* is as impossible as he is insufferable. The conclusion is inevitable that Ernest is less a human being than a puppet whom Butler puts through certain motions by way of illustrating his wry, ungainly views.

These views are a more fundamental fault in the book than imperfect characterization, for they *are* so wry. True, as Ernest Pontifex says to his godfather, "there are . . . a lot of shams which want attacking, and yet no one attacks them."⁷ But did Butler always know the right shams to attack? The terrible blight of religious hypocrisy in its worst form—in the household of a commonplace, incompetent clergyman—distorted his boyhood vision, and he never saw straight to the end of his days. He is likely to hold his reader's sympathy so long as he confines himself to attacking certain aspects of clerical or educational life, but in other attacks he is likely to lose it.

⁶Ch. LXXVI.

⁷Ch. LXXXIV.

Most conventions of civilization which have endured from generation to generation have in them something of sham, but a man of true vision sees in them also truth. May one not even defend some shams as Butler, with right common sense, defends some vices? If "the world can ill spare any vice which has obtained long and largely among civilized people," how about shams that have obtained equally long and largely? And are all the marks for Butler's bricks really shams? There are headmasters of schools who, like Dr. Skinner, are vain and odious; but others, like Dr. Arnold, have been revered and loved in the memory of their pupils. Unmarried men and women, who have observed the usual effect of matrimony on friendship, are not likely to hear of the engagement of a good friend with unmixed joy; nor is it only a self-indulgent father like Mr. Woodhouse who is not wholly delighted at the marriage of a devoted daughter. The world has always known that there is seldom gain without some loss. If a sweetness and tenderness come to full bloom in the happily married man which may be nipped in the bud in a bachelor, on the other hand, the dash and daring of a free-lance, the devil-may-care readiness for anything, the good comradeship, that so endear a man to his bachelor friends, are too apt to wither and die in married life. Even so, is one justified in arguing that a man generally reaches his best happiness either by keeping out of marriage, or if he falls into it, by discovering, like Ernest, that his supposed wife fortunately has an earlier and undivorced husband, and by getting rid of his children, so that he is free as the wind to go where he listeth?

Butler's attack on marriage, one may argue, is not to be taken very seriously. No doubt it is more humorously intended than the attacks on secondary schools and the hypocrisy of Anglican clergymen. But not so the attack on the relations of children to parents, the grimmest, unloveliest thing in the book. From beginning to end, never is it admitted that parents may be just, kind, or self-sacrificing; always is it taught that children owe no debt to their parents. In all seeming sincerity, comes the lament of the supposed narrator⁸ regarding his alleged love for

⁸ Ch. LXXXVI.

the inanimate hero:—"at times I am half afraid . . . that I may have been to him more like a father than I ought; if I have, I trust he has forgiven me."

If this gloomy philosophy of Samuel Butler is true, why the glorification of family love in literature from the beginning of time, especially of mother-love, which is one of the sweetest, wholesomest things in Sir James Barrie's writings to-day, as it has been in the writings of so many before him? Happily our every-day experience, no less than the books we read, proves that even parents as harshly logical as those of Miss Edgeworth's poor little Rosamond (who preferred the purple jar to new shoes) are really in their mistaken way fond of their children; and that their children remain as lovingly loyal as Ernest Pontifex was rebellious. His relations with his parents are no more normal than is his folly with Miss Maitland and Ellen. Fathers like Theobald Pontifex and mothers like Christina do exist, but it is gross misrepresentation to present them as usual rather than exceptional. The title of Butler's novel is a misnomer. *The Way of SOME Flesh* would do very well, but not *The Way of ALL Flesh*.

The novel, "the book by which" Butler "desired chiefly to be remembered,"⁹ is usually called his best work, and perhaps rightly; if not more readable than *Erewhon*, with which he first won fame in 1872, it is more mature and more representative. In his work in general there is the same iconoclastic philosophy, with nothing constructive except fanciful suggestions regarding the *Odyssey* and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*; there are flashes of genius followed by pages of tedium; there is misunderstanding as well as understanding of human nature; along with artistic feeling there is much insensitiveness and unskilfulness. In *Erewhon*, for instance, after five chapters of narrative of adventure in the best manner of Defoe, you are plunged without warning into satire which is itself far from congruous. It begins with what might be called inverted satire (like that of so much of *Gulliver*), as the Erewhonian reprobation of sickness and reverence for health and comeliness; then it passes—again without warning—

⁹ John F. Harris, *Samuel Butler*, p. 216. 1916.

into what we may call paralleged satire, as in the Erewhonians' indifference to their Musical Banks, which resemble in so many ways the churches in England. It is this kind of satire which seems out of place, for the proper names—like *Erewhon* for *Nowhere* and *Yram* for *Mary*—all suggest that everything is upside down. Now there is no law against jumbling together incongruities; one may violate all the canons of art, provided that the result is successful. But generally regard, rather than disregard, for these canons produces good results. Defoe was wise in keeping *Captain Singleton* straight narrative, just as Swift was wise in holding to one kind of satire in *Gulliver's voyage to the Lilliputians* and to another kind in the voyage to the Laputans.

In *Erewhon Revisited*, published twenty-nine years after *Erewhon*, Butler shows the same unwisdom in mixing different kinds of writing; only now there is relatively more interest than before in the narrative, because the satire is duller. But though Butler took pride in the characters of the later book as is plain from a new preface to *Erewhon*, written just after the sequel had appeared, they are a lifeless lot; more than the people of *The Way of All Flesh*, they show Butler's lack of dramatic power. A lady of apparently unsullied reputation in *Erewhon* now appears as the mother of an illegitimate son. Though intended as the same kind of sensible woman as Alethea Pontifex, like Alethea she is individualized only by speaking "with a laugh" or "laughing." The narrative of *Erewhon Revisited*, however, is not of interest solely by comparison with the duller satire. It has a real interest in the meetings of the explorer, Higgs, with his illegitimate son, and later in the meeting of his other son, who has been brought up in England, with the Erewhonian half-brother. And like its predecessor, the sequel rises to high interest in the story of the wild passes, valleys, and rivers of the Range, especially the mysterious pass of the statues. It is a pity that Butler was not more inclined to writing of this sort. Tales of manly adventure might have won him a greater name than his *enfant terrible* realism.

But probably Butler's mind was not steady enough to allow his carrying through a good consistent story of adventure. His illogical thought and his disregard of obvious artistic fitness are

both so marked that we are forced to the conclusion that his mind was not quite balanced. Consider *The Fair Haven*, which was published the year after *Erewhon*. The introductory *Memoir*, which is pure fiction, contains the delightful story of two little boys and a lady who visited their mother, and who, because the house was small, had to sleep in their nursery. The boys kept themselves awake till she came to bed, in the hope (to be disappointed) of her giving them something. Disappointment turned to amazement when the lady undressed and the little boys discovered "that the mass of petticoats and clothes which envelop the female form were not . . . all solid woman." Somehow the lady seemed a sham, and the impression grew into a certainty that she personified the shams of the world, when it appeared in the course of her visit that if she thought the little boys were asleep, she never said her prayers, but when she knew that they were awake "she knelt down by the bedside and prayed in sonorous accents." This is realism worthy of Fielding. But the argument for which it prepares the way, against the Resurrection and the Christian miracles, Butler must needs couch in such deep, though mocking, irony as actually to deceive some of his readers. Did he think the scriptural stories, whose never-failing beauty he ought to have felt as much as their incidental unreason, too childish for straightforward discussion? Surely he could not have thought the cloak of irony necessary in discussing Christianity in the free-thinking seventies of the nineteenth century. Whatever his motive, his judgment was at fault. No wonder the book destroyed much of the reputation that *Erewhon* had built up. In spite of some skilful irony, most of it is dull; and it has antagonized readers not by its substance but by its sneering superiority.

Then there is that elaborate argument that a very young unmarried woman, probably the Princess Nausicaa, wrote the *Odyssey* — an argument which his biographers tell us Butler made quite seriously.¹⁰ Even in that delicious chapter, *The Whitewashing of Penelope*, we are assured that "Butler's mind . . . was not the mind of the parodist"; his purpose "was

¹⁰ John F. Harris, *Samuel Butler*, Ch. VI. London, 1916.

perfectly serious and legitimate." However that may be, the chapter contains much excellent humor which is close to parody. If one never realized it before, one does now, that Penelope, in playing the part of an ideally loyal wife, does not always carry conviction, to say the least. It is for this excellent humor that one remembers the chapter rather than for the attempt to prove that a girl, in some sense a rival of Penelope's, glosses over certain dubious actions of the Ithacan queen because, though momentarily interested in Ulysses, she is really a man-hater, and so more interested in women in general than in any man. It would be kinder to Butler to think of him here as providing fun for his readers rather than arguing soberly and seriously, as his biographers make him. You might almost as well take seriously his explanation — and devoutest Wordsworthians, if they have any sense of humor, ought to like it — of the poem about Lucy, who "dwelt among the untrodden ways" — that Wordsworth murdered her in order to avoid a suit for breach of promise.¹¹

Samuel Butler, then, judged by his books—and nothing in the accounts of his life points to the contrary—seems to have been a man of fitful, uneven gifts, whose mind was not balanced. Its best expression is in disconnected notes, as in the flashes of genius in the *Note-Books*, for its power lies in disconnected fault-finding. Incoherent, unconstructive, Butler offers us nothing to live by. Yet Butler is one of the idols of the day. As a satirist he has been ranked with Swift; as a novelist, with Fielding; and since 1908, there have been annual "*Erewhon* dinners" in London in his memory, with the number of diners steadily increasing, up to the outbreak of the war. Strange as this Butler cult may seem when analyzed, there are several reasons for it. The soundest is Butler's real but very limited power; the others all go back to the fashion, already noted among people who think themselves original to-day, of decrying everything Victorian. In this Butler was a pioneer. When the great Victorians were still at the height of their popularity, he anticipated later criticism by beginning to heave bricks at them. It is this early revolt from Victorian leadership which accounts for much of the esteem

¹¹ Henry Festing Jones, *Sketch of the Life of Samuel Butler*. London, 1913.

in which Butler is held. It constitutes also his principal claim to importance in the history of English literature.

The revolt was to be expected as the inevitable reaction from earlier tendencies, but it need not have led, as it has too often, to an attitude of mind singularly narrow. Liking the new seems equivalent to hating and abusing the old. Nothing good can possibly be conceded to the old. Tennyson, as one of the most influential of Victorians, has been especially marked out for reprobation. Because he stated so gravely what had at least been already suspected, that "kind hearts are more than coronets," there are those who cannot see that *Break, break, break*, *The Lady of Shalott*, and *Crossing the Bar* are among the exquisite lyrics of all time. Because we may be tired of hearing that Lancelot's "honor rooted in dishonor stood," there are those who cannot see that the *Idylls* as a whole remain forever a great poem—splendid, beautiful, noble.

This exaggerated fault-finding of later criticism is a main reason for the popularity of Butler, who abundantly anticipated it, even to particular attacks on the Victorian Laureate. His limitations prevented his seeing Tennyson's greatness; he could see nothing but his faults, and he tried to make his readers, too, see nothing else. So his disciples, in attempts to excuse his exaggeration, are themselves often forced into exaggeration which is close to misrepresentation. Thus Mr. Gilbert Cannan,¹² by way of justifying Butler's critical opinions, gives the impression that in the age in which Samuel Butler grew up, Shakespeare was thought to have "a greater successor in Tennyson"; and Mr. John F. Harris¹³ echoes the thought approvingly. Could anything be more misleading? The opinion may have been held by stray individuals, for equally odd individual opinions may be found at any time. I heard a lover of Butler and all his works confess only the other day that he could not see much in Shakespeare; he intimated that he found more in Butler. In the eighteenth century, Colley Cibber's version of *Richard III* and Aaron Hill's of *Henry V* were regarded as improvements on the Bard

¹² *Samuel Butler*, Ch. I. London, 1915.

¹³ *Samuel Butler, Author of Erewhon*, Introduction. London, 1916.

of Avon's. And His Majesty King George III told Fanny Burney that if people only dared speak the truth, most of them would declare Shakespeare to be sad stuff. So individual dislike of Shakespeare at any given time counts for nothing. What does count is leading opinion that guides thought; and not one eminent Victorian critic ever so much as hinted that Tennyson was Shakespeare's superior. In fact there was clear intimation to the contrary in a sonnet on the great Elizabethan by one Arnold, a critic of some repute in the days before the Victorians fell from grace. "Others abide our question. Thou art free," he begins his sonnet; and he goes on to speak of Shakespeare as "out-topping knowledge."

Two other phases of the literary revolt of the end of the nineteenth century Butler anticipated, as surely as he did the unfair exaggeration of Victorian faults; and here again are reasons for his popularity. The reaction from Victorian self-satisfaction led naturally to conscious, affected iconoclasm; and the limitations of Victorian realism made likely either a return to the broader realism of English fiction in the eighteenth century or to the importation of continental realism. But if Butler was a prophet of both of these changes, in both he has been outshone by later writers.

Conscious iconoclasm by no means originated in English literature with Samuel Butler. You find it in fiction as far back as Beckford's *Vathek*; you find it again in the mid-nineteenth century in Peacock, Disraeli, and Bulwer. We know it best today in the brilliant paradoxes of Wilde, Mr. George Moore, and Mr. Shaw, and in their frequently topsy-turvy philosophy. All these three writers have at once been more gifted and become better known than Samuel Butler. Mr. Moore, for instance, writes with infinitely more charm, and in his best books is never dull. And they, often wilful and deliberate "shockers" like Butler, have had much to do in educating the public to relishing ideas of Butler which—like that about the Psalms—he fondly hoped would seem "awful." Yet it is to be remembered that Butler was before them all; that *Erewhon* came out in 1872, before any of the three was known in print. It is with its rather pale appearance there that the later fashion of iconoclasm begins—

a fashion which reaches a brilliant climax in Mr. Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man*.

Whether or not Mr. Moore owes anything to Butler in this, in another and more important aspect of his work, dates of publication prove him quite independent, though again Butler is a daring pioneer. The bolder realism of the recent English novel, which is so different from the tempered realism of the earlier Victorians, comes partly from a return to eighteenth-century traditions, but more from acquaintance with continental realism. In Mark Twain, one of the first to suggest the new realism, its source is mainly in robust old English models, and so it is in Butler; in Mr. Moore and others, the source is mainly continental. Even were all drawing inspiration from the same source, it would not be Butler whom they would have to thank for it. There is none of the more outspoken realism in *Erewhon*, his one book to influence literary fashion during his own life; there is only a hint of it—a brilliant one indeed—in *The Fair Haven*, in the introductory *Memoir*. *The Way of All Flesh*, in which there is much of this realism, was begun, it is true, as early as 1872 or '73, but it was not finished till 1885 and not published till 1903, the year after its author's death. It could have had no influence, therefore, on Mr. Moore, whose powerful though disagreeable novel, *A Mummer's Wife*, came out in 1884. Here is a work of the highest historical importance, for it is the most outspoken English novel from a notable hand since Smollett, and the first to bring across the Channel the kind of realism that had long been familiar on the Continent. Its date is early enough, too, to make it possible that it was of service to Butler in the last revision of his own novel, though there is no hint or evidence of his making such use of it. And before *The Way of All Flesh* was published, *A Mummer's Wife* had been followed by the stronger and much wholesomer *Esther Waters*, and by Mr. Hardy's *Tess* and *Jude*. So it is only an interesting coincidence, and not an event pregnant with results, that Butler's novel anticipates the unsparing realism of later English fiction.

The importance of Samuel Butler, then, in English literature is mainly that of a brick-heaver. It was his joy to demolish Victorian opinions; quite unabashed he would let fly his missiles

at the most cherished ideals of his generation. All honor to him for his courage, even if we may often wish it more wisely and skilfully exhibited! Sometimes he threw his bricks very clumsily and ill-advisedly, for no better reason than that he was possessed of the mania of brick-throwing; again he threw them with notable grace and strength at appropriate marks. There is that crashing brick near the end of *Erewhon*, hurled at the excesses of reason—"Reason uncorrected by instinct is as bad as instinct uncorrected by reason." That again is a truth for all reformers, especially legislators, to take to heart. But for such brilliant occasional flashes, one must put up with much labored, self-conscious iconoclasm which is not brilliant.

Though the most appropriate expression of Butler's incoherent genius is the *Note-Books*, though in them there is relatively more of his best than we find anywhere else, he will probably be better remembered by two other works. There is enough interest in the satire of *Erewhon* and the story of *The Way of All Flesh* to make it likely that they, at least, will be republished from time to time, and so through them Butler will continue to be known. But the day of his idolization cannot last long. The fashion will pass of seeing in every scoff at the Victorians a sign of genius; and when it does, Samuel Butler will no longer be acclaimed, even by a few enthusiasts, as the peer of Henry Fielding.

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